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ABSTRACT

This Digest explores the nature of geographic literacy. Part 1 discusses fundamental themes of geography, including absolute and relative location, the natural and cultural characteristics of place, the development of human-environment relationships and their consequences, human movement and interaction, and the formation and change of regions. Part 2 defines basic geography skills as suggested in "Guidelines for Geographic Education." These skills include asking geographic questions, acquiring geographic information, presenting and interpreting this information, and developing and testing geographic generalizations. Part 3 considers the likely learning outcomes expected if students are provided with skills that improve their geographic literacy. These skills include an increased awareness that absolute and relative location are significant aspects of every natural and cultural feature on earth, an understanding of the significance of place in terms of both natural and human characteristics, a greater awareness of human adaptation to natural environments, an increased appreciation of global interdependence, and greater use of the concept of region. These acquired skills should enable students to think more effectively about their world. (CBC)

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BY

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The Nature of Geographic Literacy

by Alan Backler and Joseph Stoltman

Much attention has been given recently to the "geographic illiteracy" of Americans. This attention has unfortunately reinforced the common view that geographic literacy consists only in knowing where things are. Where on a world map is Vietnam? Through which countries does the Nile River flow? Where is Atlanta located?

Knowing where things are is only the first step in attaining geographic literacy. Ultimately, geography is concerned with understanding why things are located where they are. To answer this type of question requires the use of a wide range of geographic themes, concepts, and skills. Birdsall (1986) says: "We must also be comfortable enough with the underlying concepts and principles of geography that our understanding of places and people will be enhanced, not limited."

This Digest explores the nature of geographic literacy. It discusses 1) fundamental themes of geography, 2) basic geographic skills, and 3) likely outcomes of education for geography literacy.

What are the fundamental themes of geography?

In 1984, the Association of American Geographers and the National Council for Geographic Education published Guidelines for Geographic Education, which identifies the fundamental themes of school geography and develops them explicitly for use by teachers, curriculum developers, and school administrators. A description of the themes follows.

- *Location: Position on the Earth's Surface.* Absolute and relative location are two ways of describing the position of places on the earth's surface. In many situations, it is important to identify absolute locations as precise points on the earth. For instance, determining the precise position of fresh water supplies is critical to filling the world's fresh water needs. The coordinates of latitude and longitude are widely accepted and useful ways of portraying exact locations. Determining relative location—the position of one place with respect to other important places—is equally significant. If, for example, the position of fresh water supplies with respect to potential water users is too remote, then it will not be feasible to exploit these supplies.

- *Place: Natural and Cultural Characteristics.* All places on earth have distinct natural and cultural characteristics that distinguish them from other places. The natural characteristics derive from geological, hydrological, atmospheric, and biological processes that produce landforms, water bodies, climate, soils, natural vegetation, and animal life. Human ideas and actions also shape the character of places, which vary in population composition, settlement patterns, architecture, kinds of economic and recreational activities, and transportation and communication networks. One place may also differ from another in the ideologies and philosophical or religious tenets of people who live there, by their languages, and by their forms of economic, social, and political organization.

- *Relationships Within Places: Humans and Environments.* People modify and adapt to natural settings in ways that reveal cultural values, economic and political circumstances, and technological abilities. It is important to understand how such human-environment relationships develop and what the consequences are for people and for the environment.

- *Movement: Humans Interacting on the Earth.* Human beings, unevenly distributed across the earth, interact with each other; that is, they travel from one place to another, they communicate with each other, or they rely upon products, information, and ideas that come from beyond their immediate environment. The most visible evidences of global interdependence and the interaction of places are transportation and communication networks linking every part of the world. These demonstrate that most people interact with other places almost everyday of their lives. Interaction continues to change as transportation and communication technologies change. We need to anticipate these changes and to examine their geographical and societal consequences.

- *Regions: How They Form and Change.* The basic unit of geographic study is the region. The region is any area that displays unity in terms of selected criteria. We commonly use regions to show the extent of political power, such as nations, provinces, countries, or cities. However, there are almost countless ways to define meaningful regions, depending on the issues and problems being considered. Some regions are defined by a single characteristic, such as their governmental unit, language group, or land form type, and others by the interplay of many complex features.

Regions are used in geographic education to examine, define, describe, explain, and analyze the human and natural environment. They define convenient, manageable units upon which to build our knowledge of the world and provide a context for studying current events. We may view regions as an intermediate step between knowledge of local places and knowledge of the entire planet.

What are basic geographic skills?

The authors of Guidelines for Geographic Education recommend a series of geographical skills for processing information needed in the study and analysis of important issues.

Geographic information processing skills can be grouped under five headings: (1) asking geographic questions, (2) acquiring geographic information, (3) presenting geographic information, (4) interpreting geographic information, and (5) developing and testing geographic information.

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- *Asking Geographic Questions.* Geography is distinguished by the kinds of questions it asks—the "where?" and "why there?" aspects of a problem. It is important for students to develop and practice skills in asking such questions for themselves.

- *Acquiring Geographic Information.* These skills range from identifying locations using grid systems, through making observations and acquiring information in the field, to obtaining statistical data.

- *Presenting Geographic Information.* These skills involve preparation of maps, tables, and graphs, and coherent written or oral presentations.

- *Interpreting Geographic Information.* Interpreting involves the ability to determine what a particular map, table, or graph says (e.g., describing trends portrayed on a line graph).

- *Developing and Testing Geographic Generalizations.* These are skills in making inferences based on information contained in maps, tables, and graphs.

What are likely outcomes of education for geographic literacy?

What learning outcomes should be expected if young people are provided with systematic instruction on the perspectives, information , concepts, and skills of geography?

First, students will understand that absolute and relative location are significant aspects of every natural and cultural feature on earth. For example, knowing the absolute location of Afghanistan and its location relative to that of the Islamic minorities in the U.S.S.R. helps students understand events in that country in recent years.

Second, students will be able to determine the significance of places in terms of their natural and human characteristics and how the meanings of places change over time. For example, students will be able to identify natural and human factors that led to emergence of New York as a major world city and describe how New York has changed.

Third, students will be aware of how people inhabit, modify, and adapt culturally to natural environments. For example, students will realize that rain forests have been used for hunting and gathering, for shifting agriculture, for forestry, and for plantation agriculture.

Fourth, students will examine how places are interdependent and the implications of that interdependence. For example, students will be able to examine the interdependence of Japan and the United States and have some idea how it affects the daily lives of American and Japanese families.

Fifth, students will learn to use the concept of region to make general statements about reality. For example, students will identify areas of the world where cutting forests for firewood is a major energy resource; they will be able to describe and evaluate the human and environmental features found in those parts of the world; and they will be able to relate them to the consequences of deforestation.

In attaining all of these goals, students will be able to use maps to ask and answer questions about important issues. For example, students will be able to examine maps dealing with population, land use, land forms, and vegetation to make inferences about the distribution of drought in Africa.

Geographic literacy involves certain themes and skills discussed in this Digest. Students can use their knowledge and skills to enhance comprehension of the world and to think more effectively about it.

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Following is a bibliography of resources, including references in this Digest. Those entries followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copy from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For price information write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia, 22304.

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